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The effects of participatory mechanisms in heritage management in rural Asturias

1. Ethnographic scene¹

In a small dining room decorated with dried animal skins, we talk to Francisco, a former union leader in the mining sector, who has become an ecological farmer. With a particularly sarcastic sense of humour, he jokes about the "danger of extinction" in the Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park (Asturias). Statistics reveal that the population of brown bears is consolidated and will guarantee tourism for several generations, while the region's towns and villages continue to lose inhabitants at a fast and alarming pace.

According to Francisco, the migratory flows of wild animals are better planned than those of civilised animals and, therefore, he believes it would be logical for biologists rather than politicians to assume responsibility for town and country planning. For some decades now, Francisco has directed this type of criticism at the way institutions operate and is personally involved in building political alternatives. In recent years, as the chair of a property owners' association, he has led the legal process against the Principality of Asturias to repeal natural park management instruments. The main argument of their case is that when designating the protected spaces, the formulas

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for citizen participation stipulated in the current legislation were not adequately implemented. Francisco recently received a letter from the technical staff at the Rural Development Group inviting him to participate in its meetings at Cangas del Narcea. On this occasion, he has no intention of driving the long distance that separates him from the regional capital to endorse, with his presence, decisions that he believes have been taken in advance by those he calls "the same old politicians." He is willing to invest his time and energy in the demand for citizen participation but criticises its appropriation and instrumentalisation by the heritage networks in the region.

2. Research objectives, methodology, and questions

This article analyses the practices and discourses concerning "citizen participation" by local stakeholders, such as Francisco, in addition to public institutions and various sectoral interest groups (politicians, public servants, representatives of conservationist groups, landowners and farmers, workers and business owners from the tourist sector, etc.). On the one hand, we approach the narratives of the subaltern and peripheral sectors that historically have constituted the traditional object of anthropology, while also looking at the perspective of the leading sectors of heritage management, along the lines of the classical works in the English-speaking world on political elites (Marcus, 1983; Nader, 1972).

With regard to the methodology, we use various research techniques, from participant observation and semi-structured interviews to the study of regulations and textual documentation generated by organisations with responsibilities for heritage. Our intention is to examine how the participatory requirements established in the official recommendations and regulations are carried out, the conflicts between the political agendas and discourses of the different heritage stakeholders and the hybridisation of participatory processes with pre-existing socio-political inertias (co-optation, cronyism, etc.). In other words, far from addressing the alleged involvement of citizens in governance as an independent and isolated phenomenon, we investigate participatory practices in relation to the dynamics inherent in representative and administrative bodies at a municipal, county and regional level, the different sectoral or corporate representations and the specific nature of the trade union fabric. Based on this knowledge, located in the "syntax of participation" (Roura-Expósito and Alonso González, 2018) we ask ourselves whether the participatory mechanisms represent a democratising, decentralising and transparency-enhancing vector of institutions as a form of defending the official political discourse, or whether they constitute an instrument to stabilise and strengthen pre-existing power relations (Alonso *et al.*, 2018; Quintero Morón and Sánchez-Carretero, 2017; Sánchez-Carretero and Jiménez-Esquinas, 2016; Adell, *et al.*, 2015; Hertz,

Paraules clau: governança participativa, patrimoni natural, espais protegits, xarxes clientelars, neoliberalisme corporatiu.

Palabras clave: gobernanza participativa, patrimonio natural, espacios protegidos, redes clientelares, neoliberalismo corporativo.

Keywords: participatory governance, natural heritage, protected areas, cronyism, corporate neoliberalism.

L'article analitza les estratègies d'implementació de la governança participativa del patrimoni i el turisme en el medi rural del Principat d'Astúries. A través del treball de camp etnogràfic es posa de manifest que les pràctiques participatives no només legitimen la recepció i redistribució de fons europeus per part de les institucions de l'Estat espanyol, sinó que adopten configuracions allunyades de les seves lògiques inicials i consoliden les relacions de poder preexistents entre els diversos actors locals.

El artículo analiza las estrategias de implementación de la gobernanza participativa del patrimonio y el turismo en el medio rural del Principado de Asturias. A través del trabajo de campo etnográfico se pone de manifiesto que las prácticas participativas no solamente legitiman la recepción y redistribución de fondos europeos por parte de las instituciones del Estado español, sino que adoptan configuraciones alejadas de sus lógicas iniciales y consolidan las relaciones de poder preexistentes entre los diversos actores locales.

This paper analyses the roll-out of participatory governance strategies regarding heritage and tourism in rural areas in Asturias. Ethnographic fieldwork has revealed that participatory practices not only legitimise the reception and redistribution of European funds by Spanish institutions, but also take on quite different configurations from their initial logics, thus consolidating pre-existing power relations between different local actors.

2015; Cooke and Kothari, 2007; Cox, 2010; Cleaver, 1999).

In a broader sense, the article discusses forms of political management in rural areas, the scope of institutional power networks, and the extension of neoliberal governance formulas of heritage and tourism, connecting with current anthropological debates on governance, bureaucracy, and political elites (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002; Hoag, 2011; Marcus, 2008). In this approach to institutional intervention strategies and political interactions between sectoral groups, we identify traditional partisan and corporatist networks of the rural environment in Spain, in addition to the progressive incorporation of elements of technocratic and neoliberal governance, inherent in EU development programmes such as LEADER or PRODER. As regards ethnography, a heritage and tourist management model has emerged that hybridises corporate neoliberalism within the European framework, the institutional structures of the 1978 regime in Spain and cronyistic dynamics at a regional and local scale (Alonso González and Macías Vázquez, 2014). Through this analysis, we aim to demonstrate that participatory processes are a result of the depoliticisation of civil society, the illegitimate exercise of institutional power, and the reproduction of domination relationships between heritage stakeholders.

3. Theoretical framework

Over the past two decades, we have seen significant transformations in natural heritage management models, which are progressively abandoning *biocentric* conservation approaches and starting to value the role of local populations in the preservation of biodiversity (Berkes, 2007, Bixler *et al.*, 2015). This change has been encouraged by numerous groups of EU experts and political committees that foster participation as a "good practice", as well as by international manifestos and charters by multilateral agencies such as ICOMOS or UNESCO that incorporate it as a "recommendation" (ICOMOS, 1990; UNESCO,

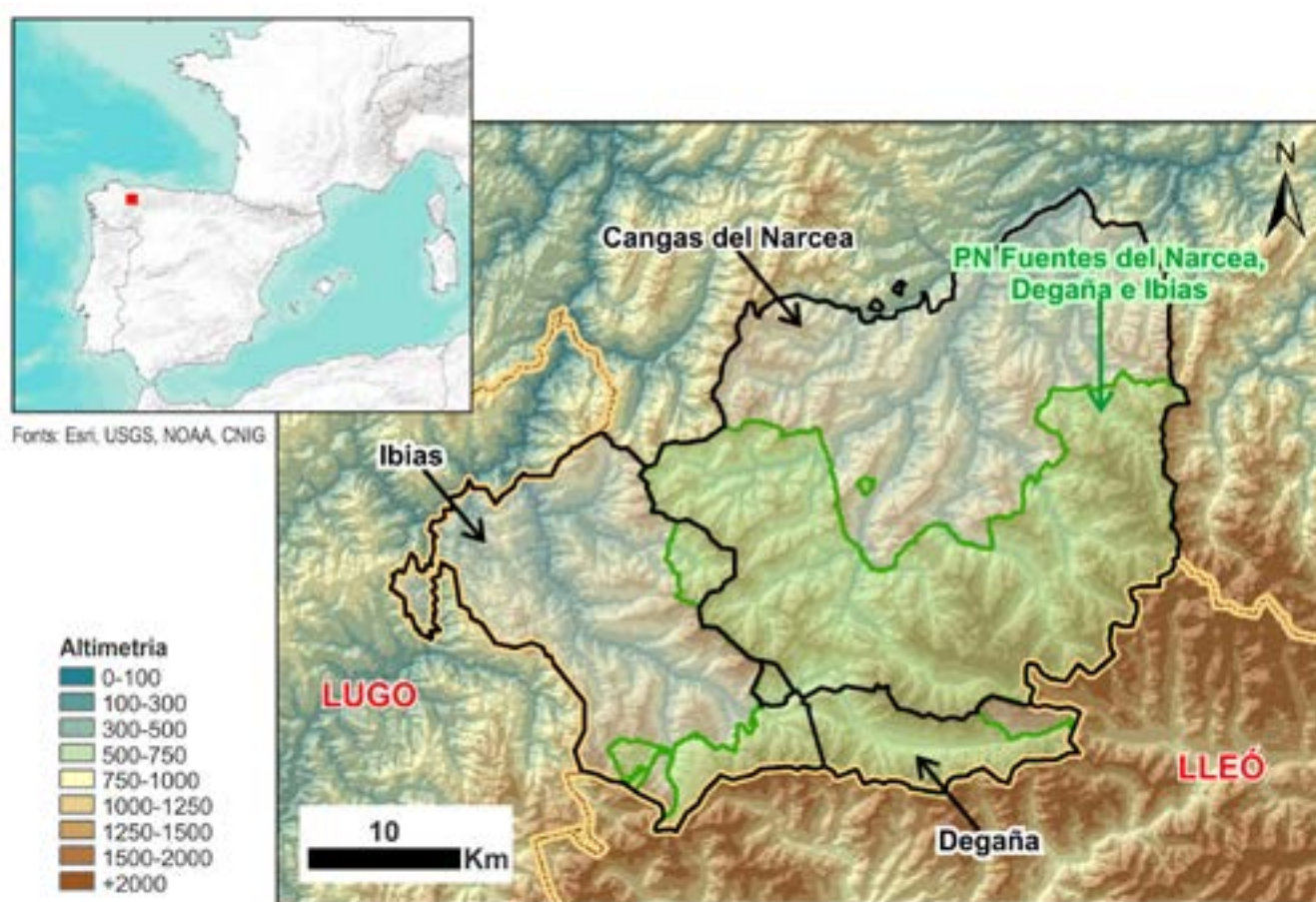
2003). As these international bodies place greater emphasis on the role of civil society, citizen participation mechanisms are being incorporated into legislation and are becoming bureaucratic pre-requisites in terms of heritage management (Cortés-Vázquez *et al.*, 2017). This style of government can be conceptualised as *participatory governance* (McNulty and Wampler, 2015), although there is no shared scholarly consensus on the meaning of terms such as *governance* (Howe, 2012) or *participation* (Hertz, 2015).

Participatory governance could be tentatively defined as a new system for bringing institutions and civil society together, in which institutions ideally share, assign or transfer certain powers over political decisions. The materialisation of this promise can be seen in significant budgetary efforts, which not only generate expectations and hopes between civil society and social movements, but also new fields of professional specialisation and a growing interest in academia. In recent decades there has been abundant disciplinary literature on "participation", presented in most cases as a beneficial political practice that should be encouraged to overcome the deficits in representative democracy. However, there is also a more critical body of literature that interprets Foucauldian participation, either as a "form of governance of neoliberalism" (Ferguson and Gupta, 2002), an "instrument of institutional domination" (Cooke and Kothari, 2007), an "anti-political machine" (Rose, 2006) or a "strategy for democratising inequality" (Lee *et al.*, 2015). At present, it is still unusual to find genealogical studies on the conditions of citizen participation or radical challenges concerning its ontological value, although more and more research laments the depoliticisation, technification and bureaucratisation of participatory processes. At the same time, disciplinary literature is dominated by applied approaches or theoretical approaches inspired by quantitative and speculative elements, which we believe must be complemented by ethnographic, empirical and qualitative contributions.

4. Ethnographic approach

Our fieldwork is focused on the south-west region of the Principality of Asturias, in an eminently rural area made up of the municipalities of Cangas del Narcea, Degaña and Ibias, with a population of 15.287 inhabitants. This population is encompassed by the Alto Narcea-Muniellos Rural Development Group's area of action and within the territorial boundaries of the Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park. In this section, we address the socio-economic context that

a profound productive and demographic crisis (Rodríguez Gutiérrez and Menéndez, 2005; Santos González and Redondo Vega, 2016). The primary sector is limited to a number of agricultural initiatives dedicated to the cultivation of grape vines and extensive livestock farming linked to meat production. The mining industry, which historically represented the main source of regional income, has ceased production. Consequently, regional governments are opting for a transition to a post-industrial



explains the emergence of these heritage management structures, before analysing their respective representation procedures and a number of the causes and effects of the introduction of participatory mechanisms in the rural environment of Asturias.

4.1 Socio-economic context

Statistics show that the south-west region of the Principality of Asturias has been hit by depopulation and ageing dynamics, by the decline in the primary sector and by

economy based on the tertiary sector. In this socio-economic context, most of the active population is engaged in the public sector, tourism or small-scale trade.

To address the territorial challenges of this peripheral and impoverished area, in recent decades the Asturian administration has implemented several plans for "rural development" and the "promotion of tourism." Institutional strategy to promote the region's economic conversion to the tourism sector

Location of the area subject to study. We have used the territorial boundaries of the Fuentes de Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park, in addition to the area of action of the RED Alto Narcea-Muniellos, which coincides with the municipalities of Cangas del Narcea, Degaña and Ibias (2019). AUTHOR'S COMPILATION



has involved designating protected spaces, designing advertising campaigns often featuring essentialist landscape narratives and the transformation of nature into a product of contemplative consumption (González Álvarez, 2018). As in other areas of Spain, the creation of natural parks has meant legal, economic and symbolic reclassification of the land, as well as the landscape being adapted to meet the demands of the tourist sector (Beltran and Vaccaro, 2014; Cortés-Vázquez, 2012; del Mármol, 2012; Santamarina, 2009; Valcuende del Río *et al.*, 2011; Coca Pérez, 2008).

4.2 Heritage management structures

Worthy of particular mention among these administrative initiatives are the creation of public bodies such as the Las Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park (hereinafter, NP) and the Alto Narcea-Muniellos Rural Development Group (hereinafter RDG). These organisations promote actions in the field of rural development and the protection of nature, almost always with a view to legitimising the notion of "natural heritage", which provides symbolic protection to institutional actions. The RDG was set up in 2000 and in 2002 the area was declared an NP². The following year, UNESCO included it in the Biosphere Reserve. These bodies have citizen participation

mechanisms in their respective governing bodies, which meet the canons stipulated by international agencies. The participatory instruments used by these management structures are in essence online surveys, discussion tables, interviews between managers and sectoral board members and public acts aimed at establishing public debates.

4.2.1 Alto Narcea-Muniellos Rural Development Group

The RDG is an institution created in 2001 to implement the European rural development plans in the area, first ERDF, and then PRODER and LEADER. Legally, the RDG is an association of associations, governed by the representatives of each entity, who serve as spokespersons for the respective corporate interests. The structure of the RDG involves multiple organisational and administrative levels, though governance is ultimately formalised through the direct participation of associations. In its founding charters and internal regulations, we can identify a clear concern for institutional openness, the democratisation of public management and interaction with the local population. In fact, its operation is governed by an assembly where 51% are representatives from associations and sectoral groups, while the remaining 49% are made up of technicians and institutional representatives³.

Like other towns in the area subject to study, Pradias (Ibias) is an example of the rural area in the Principality of Asturias affected by the exodus from the rural area (2017). DAVID GONZÁLEZ

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Act 12/2002, of December 13, on the declaration of the Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park, *Official Bulletin of the Principality of Asturias* No. 298, 27 December 2002

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To obtain further details on the organisation and operation of the institution, its territorial scope, technical team and institutional trajectory, you can consult its website: <http://www.altonarceamuniellos.org/>

The creation of this "public sphere" to represent civil society through associations reproduces the illusion of representative democracy. The various groups that make up this body appear as if they were equal, despite the socio-economic inequalities. Its projects prioritise the technical knowledge inherent in positivist sciences and reproduce bureaucratic dynamics that impose hierarchies of knowledge and a marked formalist emphasis on management. In this pragmatic context, RDG technicians are obliged to comply with the formal requirements imposed by European law, and simultaneously act as the interpreters of these international logics to continue managing their political and economic power at a local level.

"In 2002, PRODER was made up of 12 representatives in Cangas (6 public, 6 private). [...] Then, in 2006, the period ended and a new framework began, known as LEADER. We submitted our candidacy for this new programme. And Europe responded: 'OK, but now we need you to be blond with blue eyes'. Now they want to increase participation, and also ask for young people, the agricultural unions and women to be involved too. [...] And, logically, it must have an organised structure. And there must be a territorial and sectoral balance. In the previous programmes, local councils called on associations they already had relations with. [...] For example, with young people and women, we consulted the association records and sent a letter to everyone that met the criteria. With women, it worked pretty well. With young people, in the end the result was not so good. They were few and far between and most young people studied elsewhere, and... in the end we had to choose one from the Ibias board, to ensure the Ibias board was represented as well. And now, the young person has the same problem as me. They are old." (Senior RDG manager, 29 March 2016).

In this section, we address the dirigisme of the European Union, which promotes the importance of the private sector in the decision-making process, while encouraging the participation of social players traditionally

relegated from regional government (young people, women, unions, etc.). In terms of RDG management, the ideological distance between the European legislative framework and the local context is not in doubt, rather they are strategically adapted to the rural development requirements of programmes such as PRODER and LEADER, with a clear neoliberal inspiration (Mulero and Garzón, 2005). Technical staff are personally involved in the selection of associations and, to a large extent, instrumentalise these entities to meet social and geographical representation quotas. In practice, their function is to incorporate external discourses and narratives (participation, democracy, heritage, etc.) to legitimise the receipt and redistribution of international funding. This process of selecting associations is marked by secrecy, opacity and partial explanations of the official discourse, as well as rumours of cronyistic practices that involve antagonistic stakeholders in the RDG.

"Go to the office in Cangas and talk to the RDG manager, and they'll say how they help people so much... And they'll talk about participatory, representative processes and everything you want to hear. But let me tell you, I live here, and first of all, they get their relatives and friends involved, and especially people who they can control or owe them favours." (Interview with group representatives, 26 July 2016).

The RDG staff operate from the facilities of the Alto Narcea-Muniellos association, on the high street in Cangas del Narcea, in the immediate vicinity of other public buildings that represent political and symbolic power at a municipal level. These members of staff are responsible for performing tasks associated with the agreements adopted by the RDG assembly and often performing mediation activities with local and regional administrations, as well as with strategic stakeholders from the local population. A manager, whose appointment is approved by the RDG assembly, is responsible for coordinating its work. Below the manager, four workers carry out administrative tasks with contracts that are awarded by means of

public competition. Professional staff profiles are linked to disciplines such as business management, geography or administrative law. In practice, the RDG's technical staff are responsible for implementing local development projects, generally linked to promoting the tourism sector. These actions are usually defended from a marked neo-liberal stance, which highlights the value of individual entrepreneurship as a solution to the shrinking job market.

"Our association manages funds to be applied in the region, mainly for business initiatives, which is the most important area and accounts for 60% of the total. Then, a part for the public sector and another for ourselves. Our part is to work on the idea of the region, to become a tourist destination and have a tourist identity." (Senior RDG manager, 29 March 2016).

4.2.2 Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park

The Fuentes del Narcea, Degaña e Ibias Nature Park is also governed by a formally participatory system, although there are several differences when compared to the RDG. Structurally, affected rights holders, professionals and trade unions account for 30% of representatives on the NP Board, and conservation groups and the University of Oviedo account for 10%. However, the Board is only an advisory body to the Governing Commission, which consists solely of institutional representatives from local councils, rural parishes and technical staff of the regional administration. The Governing Commission is the body that approves the main actions and oversees the director's work. The management structure of the protected area is quite precarious and is mainly oriented towards the conservation of "heritage values" in the region. The NP is clearly designed from a tourism perspective and, in its area of influence, we can identify several enclaves that have been declared as being of ethnological interest: landscape interpretation centres, nature classrooms, visitor reception centres and so on.

It is subject to the structures of the State and public administration, which allocate technical responsibility for the everyday management of the protected area to the civil service. And its organisational chart can be reduced to a single technical position: the director/conservationist. That person is responsible for the everyday management of the protected area and their action is controlled by the NP's governing and advisory bodies, and by more senior staff in the organisational structure of the regional government. The director works from the headquarters of the regional administration in Oviedo, 90 km from Cangas del Narcea, although he makes periodic visits to the protected area. Amongst Asturian administration officials, there is a perception that the NP generates social conflict and that its management is problematic. Since its creation in 2002, it has had three different directors, including vacant periods of more than a year in which the regional government was unable to appoint any public servant to serve in this position.

During our fieldwork, we interviewed the three directors and they all emphasised that it is difficult to accommodate participatory logic with procedures which take a long time, are bureaucratic in terms of management and vertical in terms of public administration decision-making. The NP managers also expressed uncertainty about citizen participation mechanisms, because of the limits imposed by bureaucratic institutions and systems on implementing them, as well as a lack of specific training in participatory techniques and methodologies. The inclusion of participatory dynamics is considered a requirement imposed "from above" and disassociated from the logics of the local population. The absence of specific action procedures means that the success of citizen participation depends on the responsibility, style and individual disposition of each director.

"Having no funds and no staff is difficult. Remember, I have no technical staff under me. Public participation, both in the methodological and professional

fields, is carried out as best it can be. In a Nature Park, we should be able to have a structure: with an auxiliary body, an administrative team... In short... A structure that is essential to management. But here the reality is that there is only one director with a chair, a computer and limited capacity and autonomy for focusing on what his relationship with the territory should be like... So, participation is *sui generis*. Because it is not formalised in any way. Look, I'm all for personal contact and, obviously, management cannot be conceived without understanding people's concerns. But this currently depends on my good will, my willingness, even in terms of times, days... So I try to remain in close contact with all sectors, even minority sectors to get an idea... But often I can't and it's frustrating." (Director of the NP, 26 July 2016).

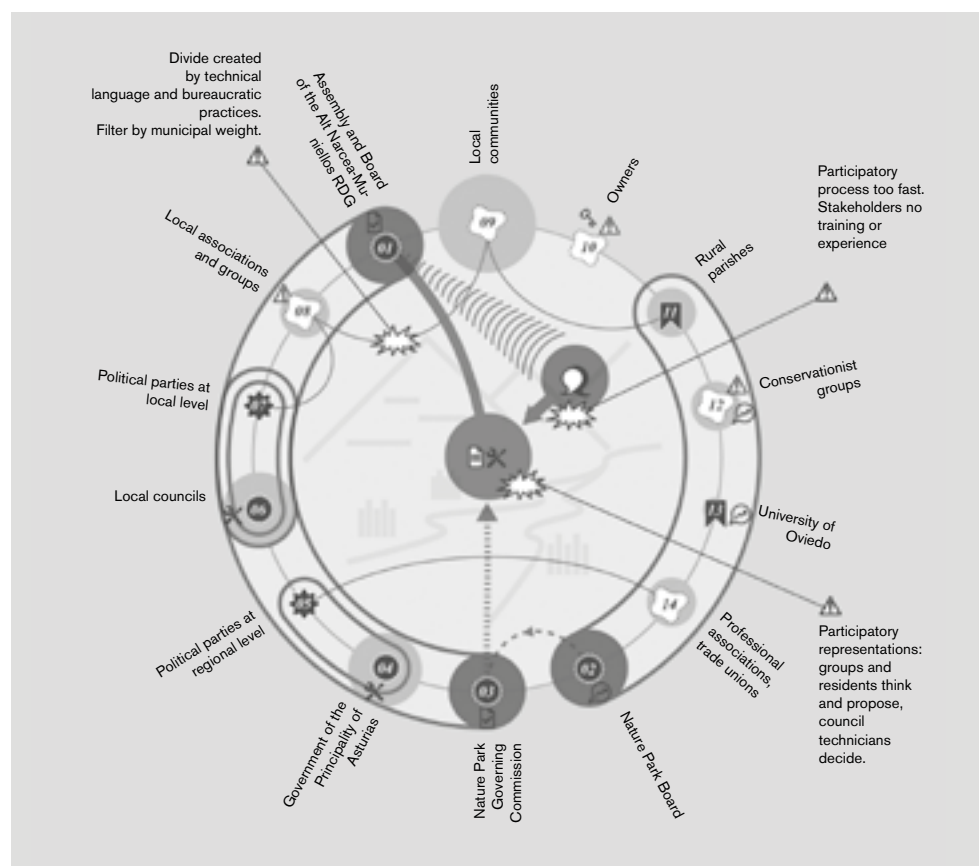
4.3. Heritage management stakeholders

In this section, we address the other stakeholders involved in heritage management from an ethnographic perspective to discuss

whether the introduction of formal "participatory" practices changes the direction of power flows in the region. Participatory processes are considered as part of the general framework of the economic, political and cultural life of the municipalities of Cangas del Narcea, Degaña and Ibias. The wide variety of views, concerns and expectations of the various heritage stakeholders shapes a complex dynamic in which areas of institutional action often overlap and intersect. We then consider the structural conditions, the interest and the political agendas of the different heritage stakeholders, exploring the heterogeneous semantics, floating meanings, and social impacts of participatory processes in the fields of heritage and tourism.

4.3.1 Local politicians

Local politicians, in particular members of the municipal governments, have a lot of scope for intervening in the bodies that channel citizen participation in the RDG and NP, through their direct representation and their ability to mediate in the selection of social or producer representatives. In practice, their



Map of stakeholders in the case study (2018). Design by María Massaguer and Sergi Hernández.

function is to facilitate (or hinder) certain citizen demands, through their privileged access to the media and their connections with regional political groups. The politicians' agenda is linked to partisan interests at various territorial levels, and this conditions their support for the actions of the RDG or NP administration. The perception of local stakeholders in different sectors of interest is that political positions generate a sensation of distrust, as it affects their direct control over resources and forces them to establish compensatory mechanisms to maintain their power networks.

"Europe doesn't want the public authorities or any specific interest, to represent more than 50%. There must be fewer public representatives than private representatives. And that is non-negotiable. Elected politicians do not understand this, and they don't like it much either." (Senior manager of the RDG).

However, in our interviews, politicians often appeal to the semantic field of participation and, at a rhetorical level, defend the citizen involvement in public management of the NP and the RDG. The descriptive metaphors used by politicians to refer to participation appeal to materialities of modernity with a huge social value. In particular, they tend to include participation as a communication infrastructure (path, channel, bridge), a medical formula (prescription, treatment, drug), or a work instrument (tool, mechanism, device) (Roura-Expósito, 2019). The use of these metaphors suggests that the approach of politicians to participation is procedural and pragmatic, and is often subordinated to other bureaucratic, legal or technical governance devices.

"In the preparation of the NP instruments, there was some public participation and, what's more, we believe that these participation channels are important. You are going to talk to the owners and they are going to say no. But there was public participation. I'm sure you're aware of the procedure: an index is created and a participation channel is opened

with arguments. The instrument is then drafted, which also involves public participation. Each of stakeholders who put forward their arguments is then notified... So there was all this participation and, what's more, strictly complying with the legal provisions in my view." (Mayor of a municipality inside the NP, 30 March 2016).

4.3.2 Regional politicians

At a higher territorial level, we identified the regional political parties and their representatives. Their agenda coincides, in most cases, with the agenda of the local political representatives of the corresponding parties, although disagreements arising merely from an electoral perspective at different levels have also been recognised. These stakeholders are particularly important in the study of conflicts concerning the designation of NP. The development of the regulations applicable to the NP resulted in some owners in the protected area filing a legal complaint, which most of the technical experts, managers, environmental groups and rural tourism business owners considered inappropriate. The landowners alleged that vertical imposition of the status of NP violated their right to access the land, imposed limitations and obstacles to its economic exploitation and violated the participatory procedures contemplated in the legislation. Ethnographic research demonstrates that the groups of owners behind this claim also accused political representatives of reproducing corrupt and cronyistic governance practices.

"The National Park is an idea of those enlightened politicians who have always ruled here, with the same shenanigans and corruption as always. We even filed claims in Europe, telling them 'Watch out! You'll be giving money to those climbers with no regard for public participation.' [...] But they [the politicians] didn't care about public opposition. They rushed through its publication in the BOPA [Official Gazette] and 'stuff you'. In short... Why call on those affected to look at the pros and cons for the Park? Everything here works by 'order and command', just like

La Nueva España

13/05/2016

El incierto futuro del parque natural del Suroccidente

Los propietarios de Fuentes del Narcea celebran la anulación del plan de gestión

"Es un cúmulo de despropósitos", dicen los dueños, que confían en que el fallo se repita en los diez recursos pendientes

(...) «José María Rodríguez [propietario de terrenos dentro del PN de las Fuentes del Narcea] recalca que no están en contra del Parque Natural, sino de las restricciones de los planes de gestión. "No vemos beneficio ninguno, solamente tenemos zonas restringidas y no recibimos nada a cambio y ni siquiera nos notifican las restricciones", se queja» (...)



José María Rodríguez, Delfino Lago y José Pablo Vicente, ayer, en Cangas del Narcea. [A. GARCÍA]

Press cutting, *La Nueva España*, 13 May 2016.

it did 50 years ago." (Interview with group representatives, 26 July 2016).

Against this backdrop, landowners began a lengthy lawsuit against the regional government of the Principality of Asturias to repeal the framework plans and documents that regulated management of the NP. This pressure resulted in a number of regional political parties assuming this claim as their own. For example, the regionalist and conservative party Foro de Asturias Ciudadano (FAC) led the amendment to Act 10/2017 on the Protection of Natural Spaces in Asturias, dated 24 November⁴. In the parliamentary process, all the political parties encouraged participation and seemed to agree on the need to involve the local population in the management of the protected area (Cortés-Vázquez, 2017). However, the lack of a definition, poor workability and lack of specification in terms of the concept of "participation" (Cornwall, 2008; Hertz, 2015; Parfitt, 2004) prevented in-depth territorial debates, programmatically speaking, and masked the antagonistic views concerning the nature heritagisation processes. As the

political advisor of a parliamentary group in the Xunta Xeneral del Principáu de Asturias pointed out, in these legislative procedures, participatory lexicon is devoid of political content and is used in an instrumental and ambivalent way.

"Appearances [by party spokespersons] are an ordeal for MPs, hours on end of listening to things that they already knew were going to be said. Because all parties have the habit of citing their technical expert for these. This is the same technical expert who has drafted the arguments for them. So it's a dialogue between idiots where nobody listens... And the same goes for their interventions... It's all for show. What they do is just use words that sound good in their speeches: "participation", "democracy", etc. But there is no real will to face the reality behind these words." (Interview with the political adviser to a parliamentary group, 26 July 2016).

4.3.3 Representatives of conservationist groups

Ecological groups play a significant role in the debates established around the management of cultural and natural heritage. Con-

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This parliamentary process can be consulted on the Parliament of Asturias website: <http://videoteca.jgpa.es/library/items/actos-institucionales-x-legislatura-ch-comision-de-desarrollo-rural-y-recursos-naturales-2019-06-06>.

Press cutting, *La Nueva España*,
14 May 2016.

La Nueva España

14/05/2016

"Ha empeorado la vida del pueblo", dicen en Moal del parque natural de Fuentes

Los residentes aseguran que la declaración del espacio protegido echa a los jóvenes al implantar normativas restrictivas sin compensaciones

Moal (Cangas del Narcea), D. ÁLVAREZ

«"El cambio ha sido malo, ahora sólo tenemos restricciones (...) sólo se aplican prohibiciones, que no se consultaron con nadie de aquí y no se ha percibido ninguna compensación", explica el alcalde del pueblo, Toño Rodríguez (...) cuando se planteó la instauración de la figura de protección se ofrecieron mejoras para el pueblo, sin embargo, no han llegado: "Y lo único que encontramos son trabas a la hora de solicitar autorizaciones para actividades como la carrera 'Puerta de Muniellos' o realizar obras"» (...)



César Álvarez, Pepe Lago, Toño Rodríguez y Javier Rodríguez señalan el monte de Muniellos. D. ÁLVAREZ

servationist positions often conflict with the stance of local stakeholders, such as farmers, hunters and certain tourism practices that are of interest to local business owners and politicians (wildlife spotting, sports fishing, the organisation of mountain races, etc.). The visibility of conservationist groups is notorious on account of their presence on the Board of the NP, their organisational capacity and the international scope of their political connections. Faced with this defence of strict conservation of the natural environment championed by these ecological movements, some local stakeholders raise the inertia of tradition in managing the territory exemplifying the dichotomous confrontation so often observed between nature and culture (Descola, 2005).

These clashes are instrumentalised by local and regional political parties, which convert the debate into fuel for their disputes in the media. In many cases, these conflicts help to reinforce simplistic discursive frameworks that ignore the complexity of rural landscapes. Conservationist groups are often in agreement with the administration's technicians, as they share practices and discourses concerning the environment

and highly technical language linked to scientific disciplines such as biology, ecology, forestry engineering, etc. By contrast, they maintain tense, antagonist relations with certain political parties, agricultural unions and members of local communities, who accuse conservationist groups of hindering the development of productive activities linked to the primary sector. The misunderstanding, in most cases, is mutual and it is not uncommon for representatives of environmental groups to accuse the local population of reproducing bad conservation practices or practices that minimise the existence of critical groups in the NP.

"Only a few are fighting against the Park... Why doesn't the rest fight for the general interest? [...] Often, these owners do not respect the environment... And they think that because the land is theirs, they have the right to do whatever they want." (Representative of an ecological group, July 27, 2016).

4.3.4 Representatives of professional associations, employers and trade unions

The interests of the different professional groups, employers and unions are repre-

sented on the management bodies of the NP and the RDG through the spokespeople designated by the employers' associations, professional associations or unions. Normally, these groups ensure the joint interests of heterogeneous economic sectors (tourism companies, hotels, wine producers, agricultural workers, etc.) and demand the extension of "citizen participation" formulas to increase their ability to intervene and influence heritage management. The representatives of these groups establish alliances with political or technical representatives, trying to increase their representation in the regional structures that mobilise economic resources. Amongst these stakeholders, we have identified associations with significant social dynamism that represent particular interests. However, we have also identified

other "parachute", "phantom" or "front" associations, created on an *ad hoc* basis by agents who control regional reliance networks and who use them to meet the technical bureaucratic requirements of participation. This accusation is not only spread by members of groups opposed to the RDG or the NP. During the fieldwork we also documented certain cases on the ground.

"Once in Degaña, we tried to interview the secretary of one of the associations represented in the RDG. After locating her, behind the counter of one of the few local businesses, we asked her if she would have a moment to talk about the performance of the RDG. To our surprise, she stated that she did not have the security of being legally listed as a secretary of the association, that she had never attended

Press cutting, *La Nueva España*, 11 April 2017.

La Nueva España

11/04/2017

Las asociaciones agrarias claman a favor de la participación ciudadana en la gestión de los parques naturales

Respaldan la propuesta de cambio legislativo y piden un cincuenta por ciento de representación en los órganos de gestión

M. Palicio | 11.04.2017 | 11:38

«Representantes de sindicatos y organizaciones agrarias han respaldado esta mañana en la Junta General del Principado la propuesta de modificación legislativa que a propuesta de Foro sugiere incluir en los órganos de gestión de los espacios naturales protegidos a los propietarios y ciudadanos afectados» (...) «no entraron en demasiados detalles sobre la fórmula de participación, que la propuesta no concreta, pero José Ramón García Alba, "Pachón", representante de UCA, abogó por que se busque un modelo que permita dar a la parte ciudadana, a propietarios y ganaderos, un cincuenta por ciento de presencia en los organismos rectores. Mercedes Cruzado, ganadera y representante de COAG, ha defendido (...) [que] los habitantes y los generadores de actividad en el campo han quedado excluidos de la gestión de los parques naturales "para evitar conflictos", en un afán de dejar fuera a la parte que más podía discrepar». [Fernando Marrón, de USAGA declaró que] «la administración yerra legislando de espaldas a los habitantes del campo. "Se legisla desde el medio urbano", ha dicho, "para conseguir algo que antes hacíamos desde el campo, para conservarlo y mantenerlo. Se excluye a los ciudadanos que viven allí y que lo conservaron". "Si realmente los parques naturales fueran la panacea", ha asegurado, "el medio rural estaría saturado", y no condenado a la matorralización y el despoblamiento» (...)

an RDG meeting, and that her organisation's general meeting had not met for many years. Visibly surprised by our questions and worried about more customers coming into the shop, she suggested that perhaps the chairperson of the entity regularly attended the RDG general meetings in Cangas del Narcea but, either way, he does not say what he does." (Field diary, 28 July 2016).

4.3.5 Landowners and farmers

The local population includes landowners and farmers who perform their activities in a structural framework of socio-economic crises, as well as several landowners within the boundaries of the NP. In general, these stakeholders are in conflict with conservationist groups and managers of the NP and RDG, although this confrontation is amplified by the media and intensified by political parties to generate a framework for mobilising votes. Farmers and landowners offer resistance to the conservationist management of the NP and the importance placed by the RDG on tourist initiatives to the detriment of "traditional" agricultural activity. The conflict between these stakeholders can be traced to antagonistic views of the environment and the right to use and harness specific territorial resources. While the NP managers and conservationist sectors consider that humanity as a whole is the depository of the protected area's heritage values, farmers and landowners look to protect their differential rights by appealing to tradition, affiliation and local belonging (Valcuende del Río *et al.*, 2011). As many ethnographies have shown, the subordinate sectors tend to highlight their historical ties with the land and incorporate moral vindications that underline the lack of institutional respect for their human dignity (Carman, 2017; Fassin, 2014; Franquesa, 2018).

"My grandfather worked this land during the 19TH century... So now some chap wants to come over from his office in Cangas or Oviedo to tell me how to do things in my own home. First, a little bit of respect. We are the ones that live here." (Chairman of a landowners association, 26 July 2016).

The interests of landowners and farmers are channelled through law firms or political parties who are familiar with current legislation in the field of protected spaces. Law firms hired by different landowner groups play a key role in lawsuits. These firms not only design the legal strategy for the lawsuits against the Principality of Asturias, but also undertake political and media actions to sway public opinion. They also assume responsibility for aligning the discourses of landowners, often introducing legal language into the local context that then become frameworks for action and political mobilisation. For example, the complaint of a lack of participation amongst farmers and landowners used in court proceedings stems from the expert and privileged knowledge of these law firms.

"Participation is a very important element in the pleas. The rulings I have handled have been repealed, *inter alia*, due to a lack of participation of the stakeholders affected by the development of the regulations and due to a failure to call for public involvement and public information. Those affected sometimes need to be informed of this, as they are not always aware of their rights in advance." (Defence lawyer representing complainants against "the expropriation" of the NP, April 15, 2016).

Landowners and farmers not only incorporate participation into their repertoire of demands to increase their political inclusion, but because at present, the language of participation is strategic in denouncing the political establishment in the legal sphere. Accordingly, the accounts of these sectors are structured to fit with the articles contained in the legal system, regardless of whether they believe in the transformative and emancipatory possibilities of participatory mechanisms.

"The claim is that there is a lack of participation because it is one of the most demonstrable factors. If only we could demonstrate misappropriation, extortion and other crimes they are more concerned

about concealing. However, by mentioning participation they made a big mistake and didn't expect us to use that opportunity. It would have been a better idea for them to fake participation, as they do in other cases. I personally would not have participated, but from a legal point of view they would have at least covered their own backs." (Chairman of a landowners association, 26 July 2016).

4.3.6 Business owners and workers in the tourism sector

Tourism represents an emerging framework of economic activity, which is particularly important for creating jobs at a time when coal mining has come to an end in the area researched. The tourism boom is one of the consequences of the leverage actions performed by the RDG, harnessing the heritage reference that the NP involves. Within the tourism sector, we can identify a wide variety of stakeholders. First of all, business

owners, who reproduce commercial and extractionist discourse about nature that is typical of the neoliberal framework, mainly concerned with maximising their profits (Tsing, 2015). For this group, the participatory mechanisms and scenarios in RDG and NP management represent opportunities for enhancing their productive activity. However, sometimes, the interests of these tourist entrepreneurs clash with the NP's conservationist interests. An example of this can be seen in the comments of the manager of the Parador Nacional de Monasterio de Corias (Cangas del Narcea):

"To me, the Biosphere Reserve... We don't care, because we never have access [...] As a hotelier, it serves no purpose as my customers can never go." (Manager of the Parador Nacional, 31 March 2016) ⁵.

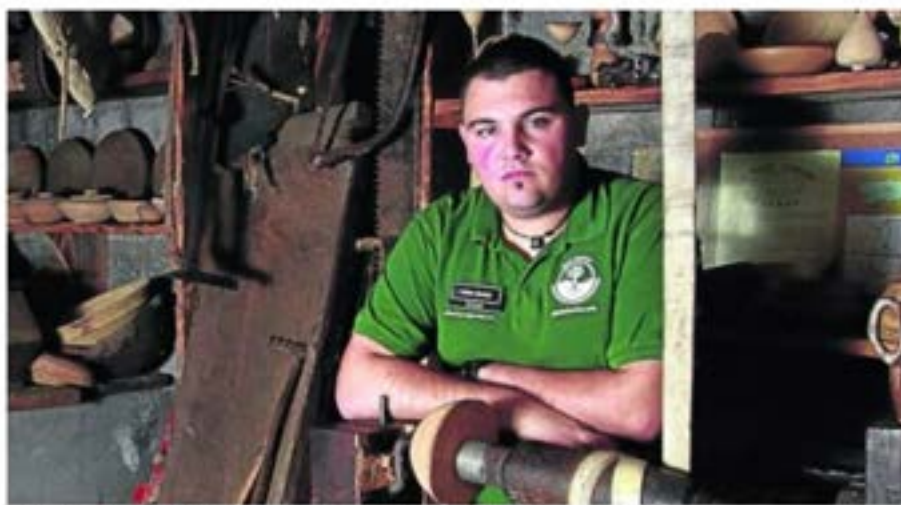
We also identified tourist stakeholders that promote what they refer to as "alternative

Press cutting, *El Comercio*, 4 December 2016.

EL COMERCIO

04/12/2016

El Suroccidente busca alternativas al carbón



Víctor García, en su taller de artesanía conqueira en Tablado (Degaña).

Turismo rural y productos agroalimentarios de calidad son dos de las vías por las que apuestan los emprendedores de la zona como propuestas de futuro

tourism" or "ecotourism" initiatives, which demonstrate a concern for environmental sustainability, the demographic viability of local communities and the transmission of the culture and identity of the social landscape. These positions intersect with the affinities and conflicts of the other stakeholders resulting from typical reliance on cronyism, which characterises the productive fabric in the rural regions of Asturias (García Martínez, 2016). However, the small-scale tourism sector is usually in favour of the NP and the activities promoted by the RDG. The discourse of these stakeholders usually links entrepreneurship and keeping people in the area, and it is common for them to be critical of public institutions on account of a lack of economic investment in rural areas.

"Of course I agree that it helps to have an RDG, LEADER, or whatever they want to call it. There must be a body in place that helps and teaches people to take a risk and start their own business. In rural areas, it is imperative that this type of training is undertaken, as it makes people want to stay here. That, in the end, is what it's all about. Although it's not just about the RDG, it's about politics. Unfortunately, in that regard things are not very good. There are progressively fewer voters, so they are bothered about us less and less." (Worker in a rural tourism establishment, 28 March 2016).

5. Conclusions

The genealogical approach to governance discourses in the NP and RDG has identified successive stages for configuring participatory requirements, always mediated by the conditioning of the social structure of the territory and the conflicts generated by the extension of new forms for the political management of heritage and tourism. The study of participatory processes in the implementation of the NP and RDG has facilitated the anthropological analysis of governance formulas relating to European policies of modernising tourism and turning the rural economy into a service economy. Fieldwork demonstrates that citizen

participation mechanisms are directed by stakeholders closer to pre-existing economic and partisan powers, channelled through informal networks of political and economic control.

In the case study, we recognise the perceptions of various stakeholders in relation to participation, which vary depending on their explicit or hidden political experiences, expectations and agendas. In particular, we can see contradictions between the ideals of horizontality that guide participatory practices and their materialisation in knowledge hierarchies, as well as political readings interested in official recommendations, protocols and regulations. In this area, it must be taken into consideration that participation as a practice and discourse is presented in a particular way in the different areas of governance. In the case of the NP, the key figure for reproducing the everyday management of the protected area is the director/conservationist appointed by the regional government. In epistemological and logic terms, the three successive directors of the NP were civil servants and, specifically, biologists and engineers, with a conception of natural space closely associated with conservationist logic. The directors received no training on participatory techniques and the lack of public funding made it difficult for them to remain in contact with the local population. Beyond showing goodwill, these stakeholders do not regard participatory processes as spheres for egalitarian interaction with the sectors affected, rather as complementary fields of institutional activity subordinated to the interests of the general public.

In contrast, the structure of the RDG is a result of the technocratic governance typical of neoliberalism that is more adapted to the concepts of flexibility, entrepreneurship and participatory formulas, which, nonetheless, are channelled through local networks loyal to political parties. The RDG's budgetary and technical resources potential is much greater than that of the NP, and the knowledge of its employees is more heterogeneous, as

5 Access to Muniellos oak forest is limited to 20 people per day. To guarantee your visit, you must reserve a space several weeks in advance.

it includes areas such as business administration. For example, the RDG has funded external studies developed by experts (historians, ethnographers, etc.) on heritage aspects specific to the region. This research has justified decision-making in the field of heritage management, and has sometimes resulted in publications that are used to promote rural tourism. Consequently, the RDG is an institution with a greater capacity for intervention in terms of territorial dynamics. Ironically, county residents believe that the NP director holds greater power than the technical experts of the RDG, even though this post merely controls an infrastructure with limited economic resources within the narrow organisational constraints of the Asturian administration. These nuances warn of the need for conducting detailed ethnographic work to describe the local perceptions of heritage and tourism management. As has been detected, the affected sectors in particular direct their legal and moral demands at State structures, although the institutions with the most territorial impact are based on the premises of neoliberal development that are increasingly defined by the private sector.

Although official discourses present citizen participation as a socio-political practice that allows citizens to influence, monitor and intervene in decision-making (Parés Franzi, 2009), on the ground we have found that the effects of participatory processes are more ambivalent and contradictory, generating legal regulations, regulating people and involving new forms of power and governance (Shore and Wright, 1997). Ethnographic work has revealed that key stakeholders in heritage and tourism governance (RDG and NP managers) believe economic investment is lacking to set up more organised and systematic actions in terms of participation. The practical problems we have identified include the imposition of temporal and spatial limits on participatory processes, reducing the accessibility of the population and its transformative scope. As mentioned self-critically in the RDG

strategic document assessing the dynamics implemented:

"Participation has been the cornerstone of the entire strategy-making process. However, it is also the most complex on account of [...] time (two months, summer) and space (extensive territory, dispersed and communication difficulties) factors." (Asociación Centro de Desarrollo Alto Narcea Muniellos, 2016: 96)

Beyond the objective conditions that would make participation viable from a material perspective, we have also identified that the institutions impose a morality that seeks to detract from local forms of heritage support. For example, in the declaration of the NP, the lack of landowner participation cannot solely be attributed to the lack of funding, but also to the limited recognition of the territorial concerns of the populations affected. In the specific case of the NP, even stakeholders that are clearly in favour of the assets declaration, including public servants, conservation groups or players in the tourist sector, criticise the failure to include participatory procedures by the Asturian administration. These internal criticisms show that the sectors affected were conceptualised as recipients, rather than providing them with an active role as consultative agents, managers, or executors of heritage activation.

"The feeling is that initially, the administration didn't do things entirely the way it should have. Landowners were not duly informed, or consulted... Nor did they know how to communicate the advantages that the NP might have... Therefore, the first complaints were filed due to lack of participation and it was impossible to speak without the involvement of lawyers and judges." (Former director of the NP, 26 July 2016).

In terms of NP management, we have repeatedly identified clashes between groups, especially in the case of farmers and landowners who mostly reject the idea of the protected area. These tensions are instrumentalised by law firms and political forces which harness the dichotomous simplification of discourses

relating to heritage management. These political disputes in turn reproduce binary framing logics and consolidate seemingly irreconcilable visions of heritage between "eco-mugs" and "office people" against "chavs" and "country bumpkins". In some cases, these confrontations are resolved in the courts, or even in the Parliament of the Principality of Asturias. However, on such occasions, the hermeneutic plasticity of participation results in widespread appropriations of its meaning, which mask and obscure the in-depth heritage debates. In parliamentary speeches, participation serves as an *empty signifier* (Laclau, 1996), that specific groups with powerful interests in limiting its definitions strategically use to suit their own agenda. Ultimately, the notion of participation becomes a rhetorical and political resource used by stakeholders even from antagonistic ideological spectra, who have increasingly fewer expectations in their transformative scope.

As regards participatory processes in the RDG, ethnographic observation suggests that they are resulting in highly ritualised representations, insofar as they incorporate certain language, technologies and methodologies (such as cards and colour markers). According to certain players, these techniques, rather than stoking the debate, actually formalise and neutralise it. The RDG meetings were driven by the institution's own technical staff, who were concerned with modelling the scenario, setting the standards for intervention, and the limits of deliberations. Following an initial presentation of the objectives set out at the meeting (concerning most sectoral topics), debate among attendees were encouraged, and different strategies were put into practice to encourage public participation. However, the voices and narratives of the RDG staff predominated over other stakeholders, and although local politicians and representatives of unions and professional groups intervened, the participation of residents with agricultural or livestock interests was limited or non-existent. These *participatory*

representations actually awakened distrust and rejection among subaltern stakeholders, who considered them excessively theatrical and because they felt they were being treated as children. A number of these stakeholders also assert that RDG technical staff did not report at the time of the meetings, that online surveys had been sent selectively and that dialogue with dissenting groups was avoided. Instead, the technical staff involved in the design and implementation of participatory processes indicated limitations relating to the political culture of Spain and the traditional forms of negotiation in rural contexts.

"In Spain, we have come from a position of being under a dictatorship... Do you think the place for negotiations here is a sectoral committee? Here, things have always been resolved in the bar!" (Senior RDG manager, 29 March 2016)

Within the framework of the RDG, cultural and neighbourhood associations perform an increasingly central role in the formalisation and legitimisation of participatory governance, and are gradually acquiring more power. For example, in the RDG assembly, they hold 51% of the decision-making capacity. However, our ethnographic research highlights the lack of control over democracy and the internal transparency of some of these associations. The prominence of political representatives in their selection implies that their representation is often influenced by the interests of political parties. We also recognise the existence of "parachute", "fake" or "front" associations, created on an *ad hoc* basis to satisfy the technical and bureaucratic requirements of participatory processes. Members of these associations often reproduce partisan or business interests on a local scale and are easily co-opted by players close to regional powers.

The ethnographic approach also shows the growing distance between the different groups and their distinctive familiarity with administrative practices and technical

language. Participatory processes serve as guidelines for technical drafting protocols that often feature expert and obscure language, which only those familiar with these codes understand: political representatives, administration technical staff, environmental representatives, trade union delegates, and so on. A broad section of local communities, on the other hand, in particular older people, women and people with limited academic education, do not understand this technical or legal language, so are excluded from decision-making spaces. Against this backdrop, the will of the technical staff involved in these procedures is a key factor in encouraging (or limiting) their participation in equal conditions. The paradox is that although public participation is presented rhetorically as a strategy of political decentralisation, in practice, it is so technical, standardised and bureaucratic that it favours the exclusion of stakeholders with less power over heritage management.

Research in a rural, impoverished and stigmatised area in south-west Asturias demonstrates that public participation is progressively being included in "authorised heritage discourse" (Smith, 2006), almost always to satisfy the bureaucratic requirements of international agencies that make it possible to capture and redistribute

economic resources at a local level. Subaltern heritage stakeholders associate those promoting participatory processes with the political party networks that have historically been dominant in the region, and encourage reflection on the hybridisation between traditional forms of government in the rural environment and the dynamics of neoliberal governance in programmes such as the ERDF or LEADER. Far from reducing the distance that separates citizens from institutions, these participatory mechanisms are becoming cosmetic mechanisms to give the cronyistic networks a cloak of legitimacy.

Just like stakeholders such as Francisco asked us to do, in this article we have addressed the resilience of regional power structures and their instrumental incorporation of new practices and grammatical forms of domination such as citizen participation. However, participatory processes in the field of heritage should not only be interpreted as hegemonic procedures of the elite to recover their hold on democratic credibility, but also as possible institutional platforms for connection and response, in a global context of diminishing "popular participation" in combative unions and antagonistic social movements. ■

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